

Discussion Questions

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (1868)

1. In the first two chapters, the girls use John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a model for their own journey to becoming "little women." What was Alcott trying to say by using such a strongly philosophical piece of literature as the girls' model?
2. What purpose does Beth's death serve? Was Alcott simply making a sentimental novel even more so, or was this a play on morality and philosophy? Do you think Beth was intended to be a Christ figure?
3. Consider the fact that Beth will never reach sexual maturity or marry. What do you think this says about the institution of marriage and, more important, about womanhood?
4. Consider Jo's writing: While we are treated to citations from "The Pickwick Portfolio" and the family's letters to one another, we are never presented with an excerpt from Jo's many literary works, though the text tells us they are quite successful. Why is this?
5. Do you find it surprising that once Laurie is rejected by Jo, he falls in love with Amy? Do you feel his characterization is complete and he is acting within the "norm" of the personality Alcott has created for him, or does Alcott simply dispose of him once our heroine rejects him?
6. Some critics argue that the characters are masochistic. Meg is the perfect little wife, Amy is the social gold digger, and Beth is the eternally loving and patient woman. Do you believe these characterizations are masochistic? If so, do you think Alcott could have characterized them any other way while maintaining the realism of the society she lived in? And if this is true, what of Jo's character?
7. The last two chapters find Jo setting aside her budding literary career to run a school with her husband. Why do you think Alcott made her strongest feminine figure sacrifice her own life plans for her husband's?
8. Alcott was a student of transcendentalism. How and where does this philosophy affect Alcott's writing, plot, and characterization?
9. Do you believe this is a feminine or a feminist piece of work?

(Questions issued for the Random House edition.)